

OSCAR MICHEAUX

A MAN AHEAD OF HIS TIME

SCENE 1

BIRTHRIGHT

Each June thousands of people flock to Metropolis, Illinois, for the annual Superman Celebration. Fans of the comic book superhero compete in costume contests, meet actors from shows and movies, and greet friends at the street fair. However, what many of them may not realize is that a “reel” movie man, Oscar Micheaux, is the true native son of Metropolis!

After the Emancipation Proclamation was signed in 1863, many freed slaves moved to Illinois to start new lives. In 1866, Oscar’s maternal grandparents moved from Kentucky to the Metropolis, Illinois, area. Their only child, Bell Gough, was born there on June 11, 1856. Oscar’s paternal grandparents, David and Melvia Micheaux, lived in Calloway County in nearby Kentucky. Their first son, Calvin Swan Micheaux, was born in 1847. After Calvin Micheaux married Bell Gough on January 7, 1872, they settled on a 40-acre farm near Metropolis. They eventually had eleven children – five sons and six daughters! Oscar Micheaux, their fifth child, was born on January 2, 1884.

Because Oscar’s parents grew up as slaves, they weren’t allowed to go to school to learn to read or write. Calvin Micheaux eventually owned several farms. When Oscar sold the family’s produce in nearby Metropolis, he discovered he was a natural salesman – a trait that would help him to sell books and movies later in life. Oscar’s mother, Bell Micheaux, treasured books and education and taught her children to dream big dreams. Her hero was Booker T. Washington, a former slave who formed a vocational school for African Americans called the Tuskegee Institute.

Oscar went to a “colored school” with other black children and former slaves who were just learning to read and write as adults. Although black and white parents paid the same amount of tuition to send their children to school, black schools had poorly paid teachers and fewer books. Oscar earned good grades, but he frequently got into trouble for talking too much and for being too curious. Like many black teens of that time, Oscar quit high school so he could start working instead. When he was 17, he hopped on board a train and headed north.

Oscar lived at a time when black people did not have the same opportunities as whites. Most of the available jobs for black men required exhausting, back-breaking work. From 1902 to 1904 he held a variety of jobs in the Chicago area working at the stockyards and steel mills, cracking and heaving coal, working on a farm, and shining shoes. He was finally hired to porter on a Pullman railroad car on December 7, 1902. Pullman cars were very plush railroad cars with berths, or beds, for overnight travel. Pullman porters were paid up to \$40 a week to prepare the berths and cars and take care of the passengers by brushing their clothes, cleaning the bathrooms, and shining shoes. Oscar enjoyed getting tips from the rich passengers. By 1904 he had saved enough money to buy a farm of his own in South Dakota, 250 miles north of Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Pioneering African-American actress Evelyn Preer starred in Micheaux’s film *The Homesteader*.

Micheaux’s 1935 film *Murder in Harlem* was first shown in theaters in Los Angeles.



SCENE 2

THE HOMESTEADER

Back then, the government created a homesteading program to encourage people to move to the western United States. Mr. Micheaux bought a homestead that had been relinquished by its original owners. When Mr. Micheaux first moved to South Dakota, he stayed with a widowed Scottish neighbor. He fell in love with the Scotsman’s daughter, but decided to move on because of their racial differences. Eventually, Mr. Micheaux married an African American, Orlean E. McCracken, on April 21, 1910, in Chicago. Mr. Micheaux and his father-in-law didn’t like each other. Eventually Mr. McCracken took Orlean back to Chicago. Mr. Micheaux made so many trips to Chicago to save his marriage that he neglected his four farms and went bankrupt.

Despite his broken heart and bankruptcy, Oscar Micheaux never gave up. His friends encouraged him to write about his life. His first novel, *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer* (1913), described his experiences as a porter and homesteader. For 18 months, Mr. Micheaux traveled to Ohio, Georgia, Tennessee, and Louisiana to sell the book and to gather information for his second novel, *The Forged Note: A Romance of the Darker Races* (1915). In this book, Micheaux wrote about how well-respected he had been in his South Dakotan community. His third novel, *The Homesteader* (1917), also talked about his homesteading experience and failed marriage.

In 1915, D.W. Griffith produced a movie called *The Birth of a Nation* which promoted white supremacy, the Ku Klux Klan, and racism. The NAACP protested premieres of the film and riots

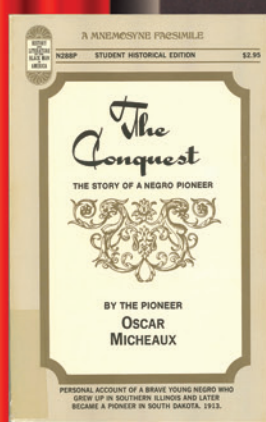
broke out in many cities. Several African-American filmmakers decided to produce movies that would portray more realistic, positive images of blacks. In 1918 Emmett Scott and John Noble made a film called *The Birth of a Race* which celebrated the black heritage.

Oscar Micheaux formed the Micheaux Film and Book Company to create a movie version of *The Homesteader*. It premiered in Chicago on February 20, 1919. That same year, Mr. Micheaux created a movie called *Within Our Gates* to counteract *The Birth of a Nation*. These movies were so well done that no other black filmmaker could compete with Micheaux’s filmmaking skills.

Mr. Micheaux produced 24 silent films, including *Within Our Gates* (1919), *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), *The House Behind the Cedars* (1923), *Birthright* (1924), *Body and Soul* (1925), and *Easy Street* (1930). Many of these were remade into sound films in the 1930s. Micheaux’s first full-length sound film was *The Exile* in 1931; his last movie was *The Betrayal* in 1948. Altogether, he wrote, directed, produced, and distributed more than 40 movies, more than any other black filmmaker at the time. Because the Hollywood studios didn’t support his work, he had to work particularly hard to advertise and distribute his movies. Mr. Micheaux hired black writers and actors and focused mainly upon black movie audiences because, as he wrote in a letter to theatre managers: “We want to see our lives dramatized on the screen as we are living it, the same as other peoples, the world over.”

Historians still praise Micheaux’s 1913 novel for offering useful information about South Dakota homesteading.

Micheaux used his own homesteading experience as subjects for his films.



SCENE 3

THE SYMBOL OF THE UNCONQUERED

After Oscar Micheaux died on March 25, 1951, his family buried him in an unmarked grave in Great Bend, Kansas. *The Chicago Defender* and *The New York Amsterdam News* posted the news of his death on their front pages. After his death, Micheaux’s second wife, Alice B. Russell, burned his business papers and filmmaking memorabilia and moved to New Hampshire.

In the 1960s, South Dakotan historians rediscovered Micheaux’s work. In the 1970s, the University of Nebraska Press republished *The Conquest* and *The Homesteader* and film enthusiasts restored 15 of his films. In 1980 Micheaux’s Great Bend relatives erected a headstone reading “Pioneer Black Film Maker & Author... a man ahead of his time.” Micheaux earned a

star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and the Producers Guild of America established the Oscar Micheaux Award to honor people who overcome difficulties to accomplish great things in the film or television industry. In 1986, the Directors Guild of America posthumously awarded Mr. Micheaux the Golden Jubilee Special Award for Lifetime Achievement. President Ronald Reagan sent a telegram stating that Oscar Micheaux stood “tall in the history of the cinema—for the obstacles he overcame, and for the obstacles nobody in his day could overcome. Nothing daunted him, and his work remains as a testament to courage and artistic excellence.” By all accounts, it sounds as though the Oscar goes to Oscar Micheaux!

MOVIE FILM IS A LONG PLASTIC STRIP WITH A SERIES OF STILL PICTURES THAT GIVE THE ILLUSION OF MOVEMENT.

The movie camera takes thousands of still pictures in sequence.

Gears inside the projector engage the sprocket holes in the film.

The gears move the film along at the right speed.

Before movies had sound, silent films showed decorative title cards between scenes to display dialogue and help tell the story!

A bright light projects the pictures onto a screen.



Above right: Paul Robeson in Micheaux’s 1925 film *Body and Soul*.

UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE®

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OSCAR MICHEAUX

A MAN AHEAD
OF HIS TIME

MEMORABLE MOVIE MAKER

Materials Needed: U.S. Postal Service poster Oscar Micheaux: A Man Ahead of His Time, white construction paper, glue, black paper, cardboard boxes (or empty sanitized milk cartons), scissors, colored pencils, sturdy straws, scotch tape, adding machine paper (or long narrow strips of plain paper), computer, PowerPoint, reference materials, internet access, and printer

The Reel Thing

Read Oscar Micheaux's biography. Cooperatively create a timeline of important events in Oscar Micheaux's life. Students draw pictures depicting each event. Write short narratives to attach to the pictures. Students arrange themselves in chronological order then share their pictures and narratives. Glue the pictures in sequence to create a faux reel of film (glue pictures onto a long narrow strip of black paper with perforated edges).

Bodacious Biographies

Mr. Micheaux began his career by making silent, black-and-white movies. Invite students to create their own "silent films" about famous African Americans.

- Have students choose one of these famous African-American artists, writers, or performers that the U.S. Postal Service has honored with special stamps over the years: Marian Anderson, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Eubie Blake, Charles W. Chesnutt, Nat King Cole, John Coltrane, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Erroll Garner, W.C. Handy, Coleman Hawkins, Billie Holiday, Howlin' Wolf, Langston Hughes, Mahalia Jackson, James P. Johnson, James Weldon Johnson, Scott Joplin, Leadbelly, Roberta Martin, Hattie McDaniel, Clyde McPhatter, Charles Mingus, Thelonious Monk,

me TV

Many of Mr. Micheaux's novels and movies represented important events in his life. What are some of your students' most important life experiences? Create Me TVs. First, students list their most important life events (birth, birth of siblings, first day of school, etc.). On a long strip of paper, draw a series of evenly spaced pictures depicting each life event. Create miniature TVs (colorfully covered boxes with screen cut-outs on one side). Insert parallel straws above and below the screen's opening. Carefully tape each end of the strip of pictures to each straw and roll in opposite directions until taut. Watch the TV show by rolling the top roller so the pictures advance. Students can narrate their slideshows. Create a mini-display of everyone's Me TV at a learning center so students can enjoy one another's life stories.

- Jelly Roll Morton, Charlie Parker, Ethel L. Payne, Ma Rainey, Otis Redding, Jimmy Rushing, Bessie Smith, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Muddy Waters, and Josh White. Students might also be interested in visiting this site to research famous African-American filmmakers, directors, and film artists: <http://www.liu.edu/cwis/cwp/Library/african/movies.htm>.
- Create two-column charts with columnar headings "Q" and "A." Write a series of research questions in the Q column and correlating answers in the A column.
 - Create PowerPoint slideshows featuring the famous African Americans. Loop them to create "silent films." Volunteer students can play piano accompaniments just like they used to do in the old theatres. Share during the Wee Cannes Film Festival.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION!

Materials Needed: paper, scissors, glue, colored pencils, crayons, markers, rulers, staplers, large white paper, tape, cardstock, computer, printer, Internet, videocams or flipcams, collection of award-winning children's books written by African-American authors

Before We Begin

Many popular children's books have been made into movies (e.g. *Charlotte's Web*, *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Winnie the Pooh*, *The Little Mermaid*). Have students create Venn diagrams comparing and contrasting the book and movie versions of a children's story. Which version did they like best? Why? How do directors turn books into movies?

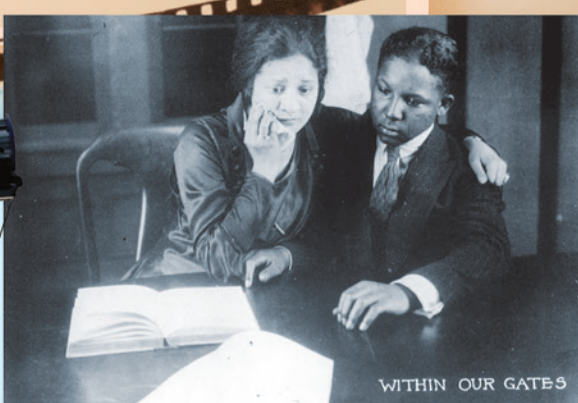


Photo from Micheaux's 1925 film *Within Our Gates*. Posters advertising two other Micheaux films are below.

Cinema Stories

Before making a movie, filmmakers create storyboards, or a series of pictures showing each scene in the movie. This helps them plan their camera shots, settings, and storylines. Storyboards are like comic book versions of the movie. Have students create their own cinema stories.

- Student teams select a quality book that celebrates African Americans. The American Library Association presents Coretta Scott King awards to African-American authors and illustrators each year. To see the list of winning books since 1970, please go to <http://aalbc.com/books/related.htm>. Select a quality children's picture book from that list. The actual layout of the book constitutes a "storyboard" of sorts.
- To learn about animation, choose one action event from the story. Create a flip-book depicting that action. Using cardstock paper, draw a simple sketch. Repeat the same picture multiple times, changing

the drawing slightly each time. Staple the pictures in order. When students flip through the book it will appear as if the drawing is animated. Movies are actually a series of rapidly-moving still shots. On old films people can see the individual frames. On digital films they can see each frame by pausing the scene then playing it in slow motion.

- Produce a cinematic version of the picture book.
 - Using the book as a storyboard, identify important scenes and roles.
 - Write a screenplay version of the book, complete with scripted lines, descriptions of settings and camera angles, and acting suggestions.
 - Assign roles (director, cinematographer, actors, etc.).
 - Practice, practice, practice.
 - Tape. Edit.
 - Save to share during the Wee Cannes Film Festival.

Reali-TV

How many students have seen video clips of real-life events on YouTube? How many watch reality TV shows that follow families through their daily activities? What makes these shows so interesting? After securing parental and administrative permission, invite students to create their own reality mini-movies.

- Create storyboards depicting their usual daily activities.
- Identify appropriate targeted activities.
- Train students to use the video equipment.
- Partners videotape one another.
- Students edit the mini-movies.
- Ensure the content is appropriate before sharing.
- Share during the Wee Cannes Film Festival.

MOVIE MAGIC

Before We Begin

Read "Little Abigail and the Beautiful Pony" and/or *Earrings*. Ask students if they have ever tried to persuade their folks to buy them something or let them do something. What persuasive strategies did they use? What was the result? When people try to persuade one another they use propaganda devices such as name-calling (connecting a person or idea with a negative phrase), glittering generalities (euphemisms and glowing rhetoric), testimonial (famous person endorses idea or product), plain folks (average person believes it), card stacking (emphasize one perspective), and bandwagon (everyone else is doing it). To help students internalize these concepts, ask them to identify the propaganda devices used in provided advertisements and popular commercials.

Daring Documentaries

Oscar Micheaux explored controversial issues like racism in some of his films. Other filmmakers make special films called documentaries to present their perspectives on controversial issues in an attempt to persuade people to take action. Invite students to create documentaries about their favorite "hot topics." How can they persuade others to see the issue in a new light?

- Brainstorm a list of "hot topics" in the local community, region, state, country, or world. Topics might include global warming, environmental pollution, substance abuse, crime rate, homelessness, children in poverty, or healthful living.
- Form student teams with similar interests. Each team cooperatively conducts research about the selected topic. Students need to collect facts representing both sides of the issue before taking a position.
- Assign production roles (e.g. director, narrator, actor, writer, videographer).
- After team members have collected all the information, they

decide how they want to try to persuade the audience to adopt their viewpoint using one of more of the propaganda devices described earlier.

- Create storyboards and/or screenplays—what visuals and words will they use to promote their perspective?
- Practice, practice, practice!
- Train students to use video equipment so they can record the team's efforts.
- Cooperatively create short documentaries that present the hot topic in a persuasive way.
- Share during the Wee Cannes Film Festival.



Wee Cannes Film Festival

Create a Wee Cannes Film Festival to celebrate students' filmmaking efforts! Reserve the school's theatre or create a classroom theatre by placing the chairs in rows, setting up a screen, and darkening the windows. Students might enjoy making popcorn to eat during the event. They could even have a pre-screening red-carpet event where they interview the directors and lead actors in the films. Only give awards if every student receives dignified recognition of some kind. Celebrate what they've learned about Oscar Micheaux and moviemaking magic!

Materials Needed: white cardstock, computer, Internet access, printer, scissors, glue, envelopes, 1 cm. and 1 in. graph paper, pencils, markers, crayons, full-size white construction paper, tape

Create a series of learning stations celebrating movie making. Rotate student groups so that every child has an opportunity to do each activity.

PICTURE THIS!

Hollywood

- Celebrate African-American actors! Have students select one of these black actors or another black actor of their choice: Hattie McDaniel, Paul Robeson, Halle Berry, Denzel Washington, Will Smith, Jada Pinkett, Samuel L. Jackson, Eddie Murphy, Danny Glover, Whoopi Goldberg, Laurence Fishburne, Wesley Snipes, Cuba Gooding, Jr., Chris Rock, Lisa Bonet, Queen Latifah, Don Cheadle, Vin Diesel, or Chris Tucker.
- Use appropriate Internet sites to discover five facts and a picture of the actor.
- Glue the actor's picture onto a piece of cardstock. Cut the cardstock into jigsaw puzzle pieces.
- Place the puzzle pieces into an envelope. Write five facts about the actor on the outside of the envelope.
- Students try to guess who's who based upon the facts. They assemble the puzzles to see if they were right.

Who's Who

Terrific Titles

- Select movies that feature black actors in a starring role. Create duplicate sets of title "tiles," one letter per sheet of paper. Give one set of title tiles to each team of students. Race to see who can unscramble the title first.
- Students create cryptoquizzes using film titles. Type the title into a word document. Change the original font to windings or webdings to convert the title into a secret code. Consider providing a key for one or two letters. Have student teams try to break the codes.
- Students create word searches including a film's title, actors, and key words about the storyline and setting. Use a puzzle-generator program or graph paper to create the puzzles.
- Have students create promotions for their Me TVs, Cinema Stories, Bodacious Biographies, Reali-TVs or Daring Documentaries. Provide a forum for them to display their posters or enact their theater trailers.



PHOTOS: Front: Portrait: Photo Courtesy of the State Archives of the South Dakota Historical Society. Birthright: left, Photofest; right, Courtesy Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. The Homestead: left, Library of Congress; right, Courtesy Film Program, School of the Arts, Columbia University. The Symbol of the Unconquered: right, Photofest.

Back: Lights, Camera, Action: left, Courtesy Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; right, Courtesy Film Program, School of the Arts, Columbia University. Movie Magic: Courtesy Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Terrific Titles: PhotoAssist, Inc. Credits image of Oscar Micheaux: Courtesy New York Public Library.

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Photo, left: Oscar Micheaux. Photo, above right: Oscar Micheaux's star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame.

